**Before Reading:**

What are the advantages and disadvantages of having religious diversity in a

society?

Since most people in America are Christians, why shouldn't we take a vote to

make Christianity the official religion of the United States?

Almost everybody agrees that prayer is a good thing. Why don't we say a short

prayer before school starts every day asking God to guide us in our studies and

work for that day?

*Engel v. Vitale*, 370, U.S. 421 (1962)

This case involved the reading of a prayer at school that was written by the school.

The issue was whether or not the prayer should be read even if it did not address a

specific religion and even if the school allowed students to remain silent during the

prayer.

Because of the prohibition of the First Amendment against the enactment of any

law "respecting an establishment of religion, … state officials may not compose an

official state prayer and require that it be recited in the public schools of the State

at the beginning of each school day -- even if the prayer is denominationally neutral

and pupils who wish to do so may remain silent or be excused from the room while

the prayer is being recited.”

“Shortly after the practice of reciting the Regents' prayer was adopted by the School

District, the parents of ten pupils brought this action in a New York State Court

insisting that use of this official prayer in the public schools was contrary to the

beliefs, religions, or religious practices of both themselves and their children.” They

ruled that the schools could use “the Regents' prayer as a part of the daily

procedures of its public schools so long as the schools did not compel any pupil to

join in the prayer over his or his parents' objection.”

The Supreme Court overruled the decision and said, “by using its public school

system to encourage recitation of the Regents' prayer, the State of New York has

adopted a practice wholly inconsistent with the Establishment Clause. There can, of

course, be no doubt that New York's program of daily classroom invocation of God's

blessings as prescribed in the Regents' prayer is a religious activity. It is a solemn

avowal of divine faith and supplication for the blessings of the Almighty. The nature

of such a prayer has always been religious, none of the respondents has denied

this…

…the State's use of the Regents' prayer in its public school system breaches the

constitutional wall of separation between Church and State. We agree with that

contention, since we think that the constitutional prohibition against laws

respecting an establishment of religion must at least mean that, in this country, it

is no part of the business of government to compose official prayers for any group of

the American people to recite as a part of a religious program carried on by

government.”